

The Countess De Saint-Geran

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About the end of the year 1639, a troop of horsemen arrived, towards midday, in a little village at the northern extremity of the province of Auvergne, from the direction of Paris. The country folk assembled at the noise, and found it to proceed from the provost of the mounted police and his men. The heat was excessive, the horses were bathed in sweat, the horsemen covered with dust, and the party seemed on its return from an important expedition. A man left the escort, and asked an old woman who was spinning at her door if there was not an inn in the place. The woman and her children showed him a bush hanging over a door at the end of the only street in the village, and the escort recommenced its march at a walk. There was noticed, among the mounted men, a young man of distinguished appearance and richly dressed, who appeared to be a prisoner. This discovery redoubled the curiosity of the villagers, who followed the cavalcade as far as the door of the wine-shop. The host came out, cap in hand, and the provost enquired of him with a swaggering air if his pothouse was large enough to accommodate his troop, men and horses. The host replied that he had the best wine in the country to give to the king's servants, and that it would be easy to collect in the neighbourhood litter and forage enough for their horses. The provost listened contemptuously to these fine promises, gave the necessary orders as to what was to be done, and slid off his horse, uttering an oath proceeding from heat and fatigue. The horsemen clustered round the young man: one held his stirrup, and the provost deferentially gave way to him to enter the inn first. No, more doubt could be entertained that he was a prisoner of importance, and all kinds of conjectures were made. The men maintained that he must be charged with a great crime, otherwise a young nobleman of his rank would never have been arrested; the women argued, on the contrary, that it was impossible for such a pretty youth not to be innocent.

Inside the inn all was bustle: the serving-lads ran from cellar to garret; the host swore and despatched his servant-girls to the neighbours, and the hostess scolded her daughter, flattening her nose against the panes of a downstairs window to admire the handsome youth.

There were two tables in the principal eating-room. The provost took possession of one, leaving the other to the soldiers, who went in turn to tether their horses under a shed in the back yard; then he pointed to a stool for the prisoner, and seated himself opposite to him, rapping the table with his thick cane.

"Ouf!" he cried, with a fresh groan of weariness, "I heartily beg your pardon, marquis, for the bad wine I am giving you!"

The young man smiled gaily.

"The wine is all very well, monsieur provost," said he, "but I cannot conceal from you that however agreeable your company is to me, this halt is very inconvenient; I am in a hurry to get through my ridiculous situation, and I should have liked to arrive in time to stop this affair at once."

The girl of the house was standing before the table with a pewter pot which she had just brought, and at these words she raised her eyes on the prisoner, with a reassured look which seemed to say, "I was sure that he was innocent."

"But," continued the marquis, carrying the glass to his lips, "this wine is not so bad as you say, monsieur provost."

Then turning to the girl, who was eyeing his gloves and his ruff--

"To your health, pretty child."

"Then," said the provost, amazed at this free and easy air, "perhaps I shall have to beg you to excuse your sleeping quarters."

"What!" exclaimed the marquis, "do we sleep here?"

"My lord;" said the provost, "we have sixteen long leagues to make, our horses are done up, and so far as I am concerned I declare that I am no better than my horse."

The marquis knocked on the table, and gave every indication of being greatly annoyed. The provost meanwhile puffed and blowed, stretched out his big boots, and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. He was a portly man, with a puffy face, whom fatigue rendered singularly uncomfortable.

"Marquis," said he, "although your company, which affords me the opportunity of showing you some attention, is very precious to me, you cannot doubt that I had much rather enjoy it on another footing. If it be within your power, as you say, to release yourself from the hands of justice, the sooner you do so the better I shall be pleased. But I beg you to consider the state we are in. For my part, I am unfit to keep the saddle another hour, and are you not yourself knocked up by this forced march in the great heat?"

"True, so I am," said the marquis, letting his arms fall by his side.

"Well, then, let us rest here, sup here, if we can, and we will start quite fit in the cool of the morning."

"Agreed," replied the marquis; "but then let us pass the time in a becoming manner. I have two pistoles left, let them be given to these good fellows to drink. It is only fair that I should treat them, seeing that I am the cause of giving them so much trouble."

He threw two pieces of money on the table of the soldiers, who cried in chorus, "Long live M. the marquis!" The provost rose, went to post sentinels, and then repaired to the kitchen, where he ordered the best supper that could be got. The men pulled out dice and began to drink and play. The marquis hummed an air in the middle of the room, twirled his moustache, turning on his heel and looking cautiously around; then he gently drew a purse from his trousers pocket, and as the daughter of the house was coming and going, he threw his arms round her neck as if to kiss her, and whispered, slipping ten Louis into her hand--

"The key of the front door in my room, and a quart of liquor to the sentinels, and you save my life."

The girl went backwards nearly to the door, and returning with an expressive look, made an affirmative sign with her hand. The provost returned, and two hours later supper was served. He ate and drank like a man more at home at table than in the saddle. The marquis plied him with bumpers, and sleepiness, added to the fumes of a very heady wine, caused him to repeat over and over again--

"Confound it all, marquis, I can't believe you are such a blackguard as they say you are; you seem to me a jolly good sort."

The marquis thought he was ready to fall under the table, and was beginning to open negotiations with the daughter of the house, when, to his great disappointment, bedtime having come, the provoking provost called his sergeant, gave him instructions in an undertone, and announced that he should have the honour of conducting M. the marquis to bed, and that he should not go to bed himself before performing this duty. In fact, he posted three of his men, with torches, escorted the prisoner to his room, and left him with many profound bows.

The marquis threw himself on his bed without pulling off his boots, listening to a clock which struck nine. He heard the men come and go in the stables and in the yard.

An hour later, everybody being tired, all was perfectly still. The prisoner then rose softly, and felt about on tiptoe on the chimneypiece, on the furniture, and even in his clothes, for the key which he hoped to find. He could not find it. He could not be mistaken, nevertheless, in the tender interest of the young girl, and he could not believe that she was deceiving him. The marquis's room had a window which opened upon the street, and a door which gave access to a shabby gallery which did duty for a balcony, whence a staircase ascended to the principal rooms of the house. This gallery hung over the

courtyard, being as high above it as the window was from the street. The marquis had only to jump over one side or the other: he hesitated for some time, and just as he was deciding to leap into the street, at the risk of breaking his neck, two taps were struck on the door. He jumped for joy, saying to himself as he opened, "I am saved!" A kind of shadow glided into the room; the young girl trembled from head to foot, and could not say a word. The marquis reassured her with all sorts of caresses.

"Ah, sir," said she, "I am dead if we are surprised."

"Yes," said the marquis, "but your fortune is made if you get me out of here."

"God is my witness that I would with all my soul, but I have such a bad piece of news----"

She stopped, suffocated with varying emotions. The poor girl had come barefooted, for fear of making a noise, and appeared to be shivering.

"What is the matter?" impatiently asked the marquis.

"Before going to bed," she continued, "M. the provost has required from my father all the keys of the house, and has made him take a great oath that there are no more. My father has given him all: besides, there is a sentinel at every door; but they are very tired; I have heard them muttering and grumbling, and I have given them more wine than you told me."

"They will sleep," said the marquis, nowise discouraged, "and they have already shown great respect to my rank in not nailing me up in this room."

"There is a small kitchen garden," continued the girl, "on the side of the fields, fenced in only by a loose hurdle, but----"

"Where is my horse?"

"No doubt in the shed with the rest."

"I will jump into the yard."

"You will be killed."

"So much the better!"

"Ah monsieur marquis, what have, you done?" said the young girl with grief.

"Some foolish things! nothing worth mentioning; but my head and my honour are at stake. Let us lose no time; I have made up my mind."

"Stay," replied the girl, grasping his arm; "at the left-hand corner of the yard there is a large heap of straw, the gallery hangs just over it--"

"Bravo! I shall make less noise, and do myself less mischief." He made a step towards the door; the girl, hardly knowing what she was doing, tried to detain him; but he got loose from her and opened it. The moon was shining brightly into the yard; he heard no sound. He proceeded to the end of the wooden rail, and perceived the dungheap, which rose to a good height: the girl made the sign of the cross. The marquis listened once again, heard nothing, and mounted the rail. He was about to jump down, when by wonderful luck he heard murmurings from a deep voice. This proceeded from one of two horsemen, who were recommencing their conversation and passing between them a pint of wine. The marquis crept back to his door, holding his breath: the girl was awaiting him on the threshold.

"I told you it was not yet time," said she.

"Have you never a knife," said the marquis, "to cut those rascals' throats with?"

"Wait, I entreat you, one hour, one hour only," murmured the young girl; "in an hour they will all be asleep."

The girl's voice was so sweet, the arms which she stretched towards him were full of such gentle entreaty, that the marquis waited, and at the end of an hour it was the young girl's turn to tell him to start.

The marquis for the last time pressed with his mouth those lips but lately so innocent, then he half opened the door, and heard nothing this time but dogs barking far away in an otherwise silent country. He leaned over the balustrade, and saw: very plainly a soldier lying prone on the straw.

"If they were to awake?" murmured the young girl in accents of anguish.

"They will not take me alive, be assured," said the marquis.

"Adieu, then," replied she, sobbing; "may Heaven preserve you!"

He bestrode the balustrade, spread himself out upon it, and fell heavily on the dungheap. The young girl saw him run to the shed, hastily detach a horse, pass behind the stable wall, spur his horse in both flanks, tear across the kitchen garden, drive his horse against the hurdle, knock it down, clear it, and reach the highroad across the fields.

The poor girl remained at the end of the gallery, fixing her eyes on the sleeping sentry, and ready to disappear at the slightest movement. The noise made by spurs on the pavement and by the horse at the end of the courtyard had half awakened him. He rose,

and suspecting some surprise, ran to the shed. His horse was no longer there; the marquis, in his haste to escape, had taken the first which came to hand, and this was the soldier's. Then the soldier gave the alarm; his comrades woke up. They ran to the prisoner's room, and found it empty. The provost came from his bed in a dazed condition. The prisoner had escaped.

Then the young girl, pretending to have been roused by the noise, hindered the preparations by mislaying the saddlery, impeding the horsemen instead of helping them; nevertheless, after a quarter of an hour, all the party were galloping along the road. The provost swore like a pagan. The best horses led the way, and the sentinel, who rode the marquis's, and who had a greater interest in catching the prisoner, far outstripped his companions; he was followed by the sergeant, equally well mounted, and as the broken fence showed the line he had taken, after some minutes they were in view of him, but at a great distance. However, the marquis was losing ground; the horse he had taken was the worst in the troop, and he had pressed it as hard as it could go. Turning in the saddle, he saw the soldiers half a musket-shot off; he urged his horse more and more, tearing his sides with his spurs; but shortly the beast, completely winded, foundered; the marquis rolled with it in the dust, but when rolling over he caught hold of the holsters, which he found to contain pistols; he lay flat by the side of the horse, as if he had fainted, with a pistol at full cock in his hand. The sentinel, mounted on a valuable horse, and more than two hundred yards ahead of his serafite, came up to him. In a moment the marquis, jumping up before he had time to resist him, shot him through the head; the horseman fell, the marquis jumped up in his place without even setting foot in the stirrup, started off at a gallop, and went away like the wind, leaving fifty yards behind him the non-commissioned officer, dumbfounded with what had just passed before his eyes.

The main body of the escort galloped up, thinking that he was taken; and the provost shouted till he was hoarse, "Do not kill him!" But they found only the sergeant, trying to restore life to his man, whose skull was shattered, and who lay dead on the spot.

As for the marquis, he was out of sight; for, fearing a fresh pursuit, he had plunged into the cross roads, along which he rode a good hour longer at full gallop. When he felt pretty sure of having shaken the police off his track, and that their bad horses could not overtake him, he determined to slacken to recruit his horse; he was walking him along a hollow lane, when he saw a peasant approaching; he asked him the road to the Bourbonnais, and flung him a crown. The man took the crown and pointed out the road, but he seemed hardly to know what he was saying, and stared at the marquis in a strange manner. The marquis shouted to him to get out of the way; but the peasant remained planted on the roadside without stirring an inch. The marquis advanced with threatening looks, and asked how he dared to stare at him like that.

"The reason is," said the peasant, "that you have----", and he pointed to his shoulder and his ruff.

The marquis glanced at his dress, and saw that his coat was dabbled in blood, which, added to the disorder of his clothes and the dust with which he was covered, gave him a most suspicious aspect.

"I know," said he. "I and my servant have been separated in a scuffle with some drunken Germans; it's only a tipsy spree, and whether I have got scratched, or whether in collaring one of these fellows I have drawn some of his blood, it all arises from the row. I don't think I am hurt a bit." So saying, he pretended to feel all over his body.

"All the same," he continued, "I should not be sorry to have a wash; besides, I am dying with thirst and heat, and my horse is in no better case. Do you know where I can rest and refresh myself?"

The peasant offered to guide him to his own house, only a few yards off. His wife and children, who were working, respectfully stood aside, and went to collect what was wanted--wine, water, fruit, and a large piece of black bread. The marquis sponged his coat, drank a glass of wine, and called the people of the house, whom he questioned in an indifferent manner. He once more informed himself of the different roads leading into the Bourbonnais province, where he was going to visit a relative; of the villages, cross roads, distances; and finally he spoke of the country, the harvest, and asked what news there was.

The peasant replied, with regard to this, that it was surprising to hear of disturbances on the highway at this moment, when it was patrolled by detachments of mounted police, who had just made an important capture.

"Who is that?--" asked the marquis.

"Oh," said the peasant, "a nobleman who has done a lot of mischief in the country."

"What! a nobleman in the hands of justice?"

"Just so; and he stands a good chance of losing his head."

"Do they say what he has done?"

"Shocking things; horrid things; everything he shouldn't do. All the province is exasperated with him."

"Do you know him?"

"No, but we all have his description."

As this news was not encouraging, the marquis, after a few more questions, saw to his horse, patted him, threw some more money to the peasant, and disappeared in the direction pointed out.

The provost proceeded half a league farther along the road; but coming to the conclusion that pursuit was useless, he sent one of his men to headquarters, to warn all the points of exit from the province, and himself returned with his troop to the place whence he had started in the morning. The marquis had relatives in the neighbourhood, and it was quite possible that he might seek shelter with some of them. All the village ran to meet the horsemen, who were obliged to confess that they had been duped by the handsome prisoner. Different views were expressed on the event, which gave rise to much talking. The provost entered the inn, banging his fist on the furniture, and blaming everybody for the misfortune which had happened to him. The daughter of the house, at first a prey to the most grievous anxiety, had great difficulty in concealing her joy.

The provost spread his papers over the table, as if to nurse his ill-temper.

"The biggest rascal in the world!" he cried; "I ought to have suspected him."

"What a handsome man he was!" said the hostess.

"A consummate rascal! Do you know who he is? He is the Marquis de Saint-Maixent!"

"The Marquis de Saint-Maixent!" all cried with horror.

"Yes, the very man," replied the provost; "the Marquis de Saint-Maixent, accused, and indeed convicted, of coining and magic."

"Ah!"

"Convicted of incest."

"O my God!"

"Convicted of having strangled his wife to marry another, whose husband he had first stabbed."

"Heaven help us!" All crossed themselves.

"Yes, good people," continued the furious provost, "this is the nice boy who has just escaped the king's justice!"

The host's daughter left the room, for she felt she was going to faint.

"But," said the host, "is there no hope of catching him again?"

"Not the slightest, if he has taken the road to the Bourbonnais; for I believe there are in that province noblemen belonging to his family who will not allow him to be rearrested."

The fugitive was, indeed, no other than the Marquis de Saint-Maixent, accused of all the enormous crimes detailed by the provost, who by his audacious flight opened for himself an active part in the strange story which it remains to relate.

It came to pass, a fortnight after these events, that a mounted gentleman rang at the wicket gate of the chateau de Saint-Geran, at the gates of Moulins. It was late, and the servants were in no hurry to open. The stranger again pulled the bell in a masterful manner, and at length perceived a man running from the bottom of the avenue. The servant peered through the wicket, and making out in the twilight a very ill-appointed traveller, with a crushed hat, dusty clothes, and no sword, asked him what he wanted, receiving a blunt reply that the stranger wished to see the Count de Saint-Geran without any further loss of time. The servant replied that this was impossible; the other got into a passion.

"Who are you?" asked the man in livery.

"You are a very ceremonious fellow!" cried the horseman. "Go and tell M. de Saint-Geran that his relative, the Marquis de Saint-Maixent, wishes to see him at once."

The servant made humble apologies, and opened the wicket gate. He then walked before the marquis, called other servants, who came to help him to dismount, and ran to give his name in the count's apartments. The latter was about to sit down to supper when his relative was announced; he immediately went to receive the marquis, embraced him again and again, and gave him the most friendly and gracious reception possible. He wished then to take him into the dining-room to present him to all the family; but the marquis called his attention to the disorder of his dress, and begged for a few minutes' conversation. The count took him into his dressing-room, and had him dressed from head to foot in his own clothes, whilst they talked. The marquis then narrated a made-up story to M. de Saint-Geran relative to the accusation brought against him. This greatly impressed his relative, and gave him a secure footing in the chateau. When he had finished dressing, he followed the count, who presented him to the countess and the rest of the family.

It will now be in place to state who the inmates of the chateau were, and to relate some previous occurrences to explain subsequent ones.

The Marshal de Saint-Geran, of the illustrious house of Guiche, and governor of the Bourbonnais, had married, for his first wife, Anne de Tournon, by whom he had one son, Claude de la Guiche, and one daughter, who married the Marquis de Bouille. His wife dying, he married again with Suzanne des Epaulles, who had also been previously

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